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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a number of hypotheses concerned with individual learning strategies based on a pre-experimental, observational case study. Three children (two seven-year-olds and one eleven-year-old) native speakers of Hebrew were the subjects of the study. The language data collected from them consisted of spontaneous speech about their everyday activities. The study presented here centers around two main issues: (1) the construction of an index of development based on the acquisition of the progressive form in English; and (2) the development of an index of evaluation for individual learning strategies. Samples of indexes are given in the paper, supported by the data observed in the study. It is suggested that such indexes be developed for each of the various sets of factors affecting second language learning in order to arrive at a more global learning profile. (Author/AMH)

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Individual Learning Strategies: A Case Study of Three Hebrew Speakers Learning English as a Second Language*

Elite Olshtain

INTRODUCTION

The affective and cognitive domains have gained considerable prominence in recent second language research. Thus, the concern with 'variability in learning' has grown. It is to some aspects of variability that the present paper addresses itself.

Research concerned with affective and cognitive domains, invariably hinges upon the notion of the successful versus the unsuccessful language learner. Yet, in spite of the growing interest in this area, the characteristics of either type of learner remain, at best, elusive. From the numerous studies engaged in the pursuit of a better and more global understanding of the process of second language acquisition, several significant results seem to stand out.

According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), motivation and attitude seem to be vital affective factors in second language acquisition. The Naiman, Fröhlich and Stern (1975) study singles out field independence and tolerance for ambiquity as vital cognitive factors while Heyde (1977) suggests global self-esteem as important. Joan Rubin (1975) lists various 'good' learning strategies based on classroom observation, and Krashen (1977) talks about the good language learner as

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"an acquirer, who first of all is able to obtain sufficient intake in the L2, and second has a low affective filter to enable him to utilize this input..."

The present paper will attempt to add a few ideas to the discussion revolving around the 'good language learner'. It is, at best, a pre-experimental, observational study, conceptualizing some hypotheses which require further and more rigorous research. It seems that with the present state of the art in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), we need pre-experimental studies in order to help us develop useful hypotheses, and larger-scale experimental research to test these hypotheses. This paper belongs to the first group.

THE SUBJECTS

Three subjects, two seven year olds and one eleven year old, were selected to participate in the present study. The selection of the participants was based on both their availability for research and on whether, as a group, they would allow for an equalization of factors. Thus all the Ss are speakers of Hebrew and they came to the States with their families for a period of one to two years.

Since their parents were on sabbatical, the three children viewed the period of stay in the States most favorably (trips to interesting places, meeting new people, more comfort, etc.) They were all highly motivated to learn English during their stay in the States, in order to 'return to Israel with a good knowledge of English'. Thus, although the intention of stay was limited (see Schumann - in press) they were highly motivated to learn the language.

The three children lived in the same neighborhood and went to the same school, thus encountering similar social interactions. They were all well received by both peers and teachers. The study reported here began four weeks after the Ss' arrival in the States and continued for five months. During this period of time data was collected once a week, excluding holidays, vacations and occasional illness.

Each subject's general learning profile might be an intervening factor in the overall acquisition of English, therefore a brief description is provided here. Based on observation and teachers' comments there did not seem to be any overt significant differences in their overall profiles.

Subject A - is a girl of 7 and will be referred to as the 'good language learner' in the group. She is considered a good learner in all other school subjects as well, and was recommended by her teachers as elligible for the mentally gifted. She is a friendly and outgoing person and she made many American friends among her classmates.

Subject B - a boy of 7, in the same class as subject A, is also considered mentally gifted and a very good pupil, he is however less outgoing and rather shy. Subject B managed to make friends in class in spite of his shyness, and towards the end of the study seemed to have acculturated[1] as well as subject A.

Subject C - a boy of 11 (subject B is his younger brother) is very active and somewhat high-strung. He is very talkative and having a strong drive to communicate, gets easily involved in conversations with both children and adults. Subject C, being older than subjects A and B, was confronted with two problems that the younger ones did not have:

a) the language content of the sixth grade is much more complex than the language content typical of the second grade, and therefore more difficult for the SL learner;[2]

b) in order to express himself and communicate his thoughts and feelings, subject C required a much richer language in terms of both structure and vocabulary, than he had available to him at this stage. These two factors may have affected his learning process considerably. He did however exhibit a strong will to learn as well as obvious diligence. Subject C, for reasons which will be explained subsequently, is considered the least successful learner in the group.

DATA COLLECTION

The language data collected from the three Ss consisted mainly of spontaneous speech related to: school events, holidays, pictures, etc. About 70% of the collected material involved conversation between each subject and the interlocutor and the other 30% between each subject and an English speaking boy of ten.

In order to keep the collection of the data as uniform as possible, the same topics of discussion were brought up with each subject, and the same pictures were used, and the same performance tasks assigned. There were altogether thirteen sessions with each subject, the first ten devoted to free conversation and the description of pictures, and the last three to retelling a story heard in Hebrew. The last task - retelling a story heard in Hebrew, was used to observe mainly communication strategies. Each session was on the average about 20-30 minutes long.

ESTABLISHING AN INDEX OF DEVELOPMENT

In addition to the attempt to control, as much as possible, for data collection, it was necessary to establish an index of development, in order to evaluate the language acquisition of each subject - in a uniform manner. The need for such an index in research in general, was discussed in detail by Diane Larsen-Freeman (1976). For the present study a unique solution presented itself: since the material had originally been collected in order to observe the development and acquisition of the form and function of the progressive, this presented a useful index of development. Thus it was possible to grade the three Ss in terms of their rates of acquisition of the progressive during the period of the study (approximately five months) and define the fastest acquirer as the 'best language learner' in the group, and the slowest one as the 'least successful learner'.[3]

The acquisition of the progressive can be best viewed in succesive stages. Five such stages were observed in the present study, the first four devoted to the acquisition of form and the last one to meaning. Stage One begins as soon as the learner starts to use any form of the auxiliary in front of the verb-ing. Prior to stage one all learners used only verb-ing with no auxiliary. The acquisition of the auxiliary (the form of the progressive) begins with the learner using some auxiliries in some of the obligatory contexts. As the acquisition progresses the learner will use the auxiliary in most obligatory contexts, and eventually s/he will acquire the function of the progressive.

The following five stages were therefore established as the stepping stones in the acquisition of the progressive, for speakers of Hebrew:

Stage One	-	1st person sing.	50-80% of the oblig. contexts
		3rd person sing.	30% of the oblig. "
Stage Two	-	1st person sing.	90%
		3rd person sing.	50%
		others	30%
Stage Three	-	1st person sing.	90%
		3rd person sing.	90%
		others	50-80% *
Stage Four	-	Form fully acquired	
Stage Five	-	Function fully acquired	

The above five stages of development were evident in the acquisition process of the three Ss, but only subject A completed the whole sequence while subjects B and C were at stage three when the study ended. We can assume however, that given sufficient time the last two subjects would have acquired the progressive as well.

By comparing the progress of acquisition of the progressive for the three subjects, it is possible to establish the 'good language learner' in the group as the fastest acquirer, and the less successful learner as the slowest acquirer. Diagram 1 provides us with such a comparison, showing the stage at which each learner has arrived according to the sessions of the data collection.

Insert Diagram 1 - here

It is obvious from this diagram that subject A is by far the fastest acquirer in the group while subjects B and C were quite close together, C somewhat slower.[4] With this picture in

* The two younger subjects acquired the first person plural and the second person, before they acquired the third person plural, while the 11 year old acquired the third person plural first.

mind, it is now possible to observe the individual learning strategies employed by each subject, in an attempt to single out strategies of the 'good language learner'.

INDIVIDUAL STRATEGIES

In the search for a more global understanding of the learning process, various studies have concerned themselves with individual strategies. Often however, there has been considerable confusion between 'communication' versus 'learning' strategies. Tarone, Frauenfelder and Seliker (1976), try to distinguish between 'learning' and 'production' strategies, since they, too, feel that considerable confusion exists in the field, concerning strategies.

An attempt has been made in this paper, to distinguish between learning strategies which are related to the internalization of L2 and the rule formation, as opposed to communication strategies which are concerned with the interaction and the face to face communication. While learning strategies are directed towards creating linguistic forms, communication strategies are corrective and additive in nature and concern themselves with getting the message across. Both types of strategies were observed in this paper.

Learning strategies seem to operate on two levels: those related to the external input of data, versus those related to the internal theory construction. This distinction is similar to the one made by Andersen (1978) between 'acquisition towards an internal norm' versus 'acquisition towards an external norm'. For the sake of simplicity we shall refer to these strategies as internal learning strategies versus external learning strategies.

Internal learning strategies, as observed in this study, are the following: (the list is obviously not exhaustive)

a) L1 transfer - clear cases of word-for-word translation
b) incorporation of acquired forms - clear cases of linguistic forms learned in L2 being productively incorporated by the learner in his/her own speech.
c) a deliberate 'testing technique' which the learner uses consciously in order to evaluate his/her hypotheses.

External learning strategies are related to the learner's ability to turn external input into useful intake. The ones examined in this study were:

a) memorization of chunks
b) self correction

External strategies seem to relate to Rubin's (1975) 'attenting to form'. Thus it seems that the combination of external and internal strategies accounts for the overall concept of learning strategies. Different learners may utilize these learning strategies in different ways and to different degrees.

The present paper is attempting to arrive at a hypothesis concerning the best 'combination' of learning strategies that seems to characterize the 'good language learner'. The definition of the 'good language learner' for the purposes of this study was arrived at independently of the study of learning strategies, on the basis of their acquisition of progressive, as was explained earlier in this paper. It is now possible to focus on the characteristic learning strategies of each learner and compare the various learners.

Communication strategies were examined via different tasks, and quite separately from the learning strategies. The following were observed:

a) circumlocution

b) body and face gestures

c) requests for clarification (at the receptive level)

DATA ON INDIVIDUAL LEARNING STRATEGIES

L1 transfer is defined here as a 'word-for-word' translation from the native language into the target language. Cases of L1 interference exhibiting lack of agreement, wrong tenses or wrong word order, are not considered here pure L1 transfer if a word-for-word translation is not obvious. On the basis of the observation of the three Ss, it seems important to single out the individual tendency to such pure L1 transfer.

All Ss, as was to be expected, exhibited a higher degree of L1 transfer in the earlier stages of their L2 acquisition, than later on. However, while subject A, the successful learner, constantly decreased the L1 transfer strategy, subject C, the least successful learner, maintained a high degree of L1 transfer to the end of the study.

Examples of L1 transfer for each of the three subjects are given below.[5] The decisive factor in evaluating a faulty form as L1 transfer, was the equivalent utterance in L1, in this case Hebrew. Positive transfer is deliberately disregarded since it would be impossible to distinguish between L2 learning and such positive transfer. The examples of L1 transfer are given in reference to the time from the beginning of the study.

Subject A - I want to do this another time. (=again)
Where to put it?
Yeah, I catch it, (=I got it, understood) - 4 weeks

Every time she smile. (= she smiles all the time)
6weeks

After 6 weeks the examples of true L1 transfer in subject A's sppech became very rare (less than 10%)

Subject B - This bed pink and this bed white. (= This is a pink bed and that is a white bed) 5 weeks
The dog take of her the ball. 10 weeks

Subject C - She say to him goodbye. If he wasn't go to the work with time he wasn't need to eat the breakfast so fast and to look in the watch all second. 3 months

Everybody know in the class - if I give to them three choices what I can take or wrestling or dancing or other things, they know what they have. 4 months

We were in vacation we drive from here to Grand Canyon, we saw from all the places the Grand Canyon. We saw the boat that the first man went in it in the river. 5 months

Subject C maintained a higher degree of L1 transfer throughout the whole period of the study but he used English most fluently and produced the fastest and longest utterances with seeming ease.

If we view L1 transfer as being at one end of the pole indicating 'lack of acquisition', the strategy which we find at the other end of the pole is 'incorporation of acquired forms'. The latter is often hard to define, especially when the form is still erroneous. It is however possible to isolate forms which are so different from the L1 equivalent utterance, that they can only be accounted for by incorporation of newly learned forms. These are the cases that we are interested in in terms of the language strategy defined here as 'incorporation of newly acquired forms'.

For each stage in the learning process we shall be tapping therefore, the two extremes: L1 transfer versus incorporation of newly acquired forms. The ratio between these two different strategies might be significant in terms of describing the 'good' versus the 'bad' language learner. Assuming that for all language learners L1 transfer is maximal at the initial stages while incorporation is minimal, the gradual progress

in L2 should bring about a reversal of this ratio - L1 transfer being gradually reduced and incorporation of new forms gradually increased. Our hypothesis here is that this movement along the continuum between the two extremes is done more rapidly by the good language learner than by the less successful one. In the above examples we saw how subject A got rid of most of her L1 transfer by the sixth week of the study while subject C was still using this strategy intensively after five months. The following examples show incorporation of newly acquired forms for each of the studied subjects. In terms of the ratio suggested above, incorporation can be viewed as negatively related to L1 transfer.

Subject A - 'cause then she takin it into the nurse... Like we have 'milk' and near the word milk we have a little circle. 6 weeks

And on the board we have the duck going to the listening center. 8 weeks

Subject B - This is a yellow chair and this is a brown chair. (acquired position of adj.) 10 weeks

Subject C - They are eating breakfast and looking at the clock. (used preposition consistently correctly) 5 months

The third internal learning strategy mentioned above is a deliberate testing technique which the learner uses in order to test hypotheses. This technique was exhibited primarily by subject A. Although it is considered an internal strategy (relating to the internalization process) it is closely related to the two external strategies mentioned above: memorization of chunks and self-correction. The testing of new forms is most evident with memorized chunks, and the learner's self-correction follows the deliberate testing. In the case of subject A it was often very obvious that she would consciously try to use a new form (recognizable as a memorized chunk) and watch the listeners carefully, in order to evaluate their reaction. In this sense it was almost like a 'hit or miss'

technique.

The following are some examples of the 'hit or miss' testing technique employed by subject A. Most of the linguistic forms shown here seem to have been picked up from TV commercials and incorporated in the subject's own speech

Subject A - Can I poke my hand in this bag?

Something beautiful happened today in class.

The first example was lifted out of a commercial "Just poke your hand in a Nabisco cooky jar..." which she had memorized previously and the second example was probably lifted out of "Somehhing beautiful happened to your hair..." Such lifting from the linguistic input was most obvious when commercials were the source, but it also took place in the classroom (teachers' or peers' talk). Sometimes the incorporation result was an erroneous form:

Watch it out!

which was probably a combination of 'Watch out!' and 'Watch it!'.

Incorporation of memorized chunks is often very hard to establish, unless the researcher has access to most of the input. It seems however a worthwhile strategy to observe, since many adults[6] report that they still do that even when their command of L2 is quite good. In the present study it proved to be a typical activity of the successful language learner.

Since it is very hard to establish cases of memorized chunks which are incorporated into the learner's speech, we may want to work with the external strategies which can be operationalized easily. It seems that a learner who can easily repeat longer stretches of speech in L2 is likely to be the better 'memorizer'. In our case subject A was capable of repeating fifteen syllables or more, correctly, even when it contained forms that she had not mastered (use of aux), while subjects B and C made the same errors in such repetitions

as they did in regular speech. At this point it is only a hunch that ability to repeat is related to ability to memorize, but it seems a worthwhile path to take in further investigation. Also in terms of self-correction subject A was much more effective in identifying erros on a page with transcription of her speech from an earlier session while subjects B and C only made minor corrections. These two strategies can easily be tested and evaluated in a larger-scale study.

A TENTATIVE INDEX FOR EVALUATING LEARNING STRATEGIES

Individual or idiosyncratic learning strategies, are only one set of factors that might account for variability in SLA (see Hatch &Wagner-Gough 1976 and Schumann - in press). It is most probably one of the least tangible sets of factors and therefore hard to observe and even harder to measure. It is necessary therefore to develop some index of evaluation which would allow us to compare individual learners in various studies. On the basis of the data collected for the present study, a tentative index for evaluating learning strategies might be developed by assigning numerical value to the strategies which were discussed here:

<u>Internal Strategies</u>

L1 transfer	-1 (for 10% or more cases)
Incorp. of acq. forms	+1 (10% - 20%) +2 (over 20%)
Testing technique - 'hit or miss'	+1 (any example)

<u>External Strategies</u>

Memorization of chunks (special task)	+1
Self-correction	+1 (up to 60%) +2 (above 60%)[7]

This evaluation index should be worked out for every session of data collection, for each individual subject. Then an accumulative index should be computed for all

the sessions (weighted mean) for each subject, arriving at the overall index representing the learning strategies employed by each subject. In order to test the validity of such an index we need an independent evaluation of their rate of acquisition, in our case the acquisition of the progressive.

The following index of learning strategies was calculated for the three Ss participating in the present study based on the accumulative weighted mean for the thirteen sessions of data collection:[8]

	Subj. A	Subj. B	Subj. C
L1 transfer	0	0	-1
Incorp. Acquired Forms	2	1	1
Testing tech. - 'hit or miss'	1	0	0
total for internal strat.	3	1	0
Memorizing chunks	1	1	0
self-correction	2	0	1
TOTAL for all learning strategies	6	2	1

Subject A received the highest possible score on the learning strategies index: 3 for internal and 6 for the overall total. Subject B received only 1 on the internal measure and 2 on the total, while subject C received 0 on internal and only 1 for the total index. This index sets subject A apart as a very successful learner while subjects B and C are considerably less successful but quite close to one another. Comparing these results with diagram 1 we see that a very similar picture emerges from both indexes. Both indexes, arrived at independently, single out subject A as the most successful learner in the group while C and B are quite close to one another, buject C being somewhat less successful.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the pre-experimental study carried out here, an attempt has been made to arrive at a number of hypotheses concerning individual learning strategies. It seems that all learners exhibit the use of a number of different strategies operating simultaneously. The learner gradually moves from mostly L1 transfer to mostly incorporating acquired forms, on a continuum of changing ratios between the two poles.

The more successful language learner is capable of moving faster along the continuum than the slower learner, employing additional techniques which help speed up the progress, like memorizing chunks, testing the usage of new forms, etc. In the present, limited study of three subject, this rate of progress seems to correspond favorably with the rate of progress shown in terms of the acquisition of the progressive. Further research is needed to verify the following:

a) is the acquisition of the progressive a useful index of development to use with beginners of various backgrounds and are the stages described here valid for different L1 learners?

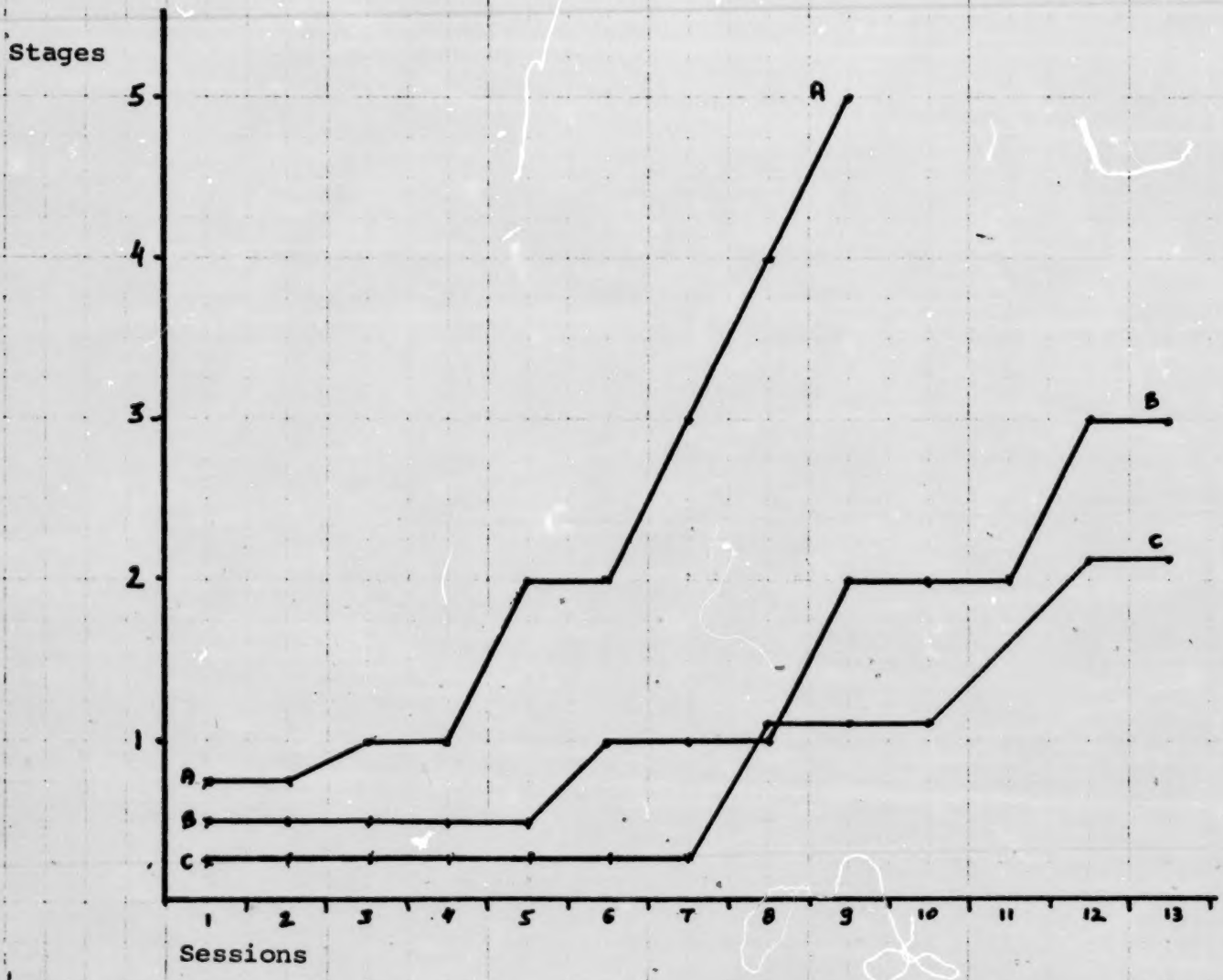
b) Is the index of learning strategies suggested here operational for large scale studies?

The study presented here relates to one set of factors affecting the language learner, ignoring all the others. In reality of course, all the various factors operate together. While we suggested here an index of evaluation for learning strategies, it is obviously necessary to develop similar indexes for each of the other sets of factors: cognitive factors, social factors, affective factors, instructional factors etc. If we had an index for each of these sets of factors, we could

develop a more complete learning profile for each learner. It would then be possible to evaluate various interactions of factors and perhaps find the optimal one for SLA. It seems that the time is ripe for the development of such indexes followed by further investigation to validate them in both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies.

Diagram 1

The Acquisition of the English Progressive



FOOTNOTES

1. Acculturation here refers to integration with the peer-group.

2. Krashen, in his plenary speech at the Los Angeles Second Language Research Forum, 1975, emphasized the importance of simplified language as input for the beginner. The second graders were surrounded by simpler language in the classroom than was the sixth grader, by virtue of the grade level alone, a factor which may have made it easier for the youger two subjects in comparison to the older one.

3. The acquisition of the English progressive must be considered as having several stages of development within which form is acquired first and function only later. Within each such stage the learner may exhibit 'peaks and valleys' in terms of correct responses within obligatory contexts, but these peaks and valleys will be ignored for the present paper.

4. Lily Fillmore in her PhD dissertation (1976) shows even more surprising differences in the rate of acquisition between different subjects.

5. It is often difficult to distinguish between developmentally conditioned errors and those due to actual L1 transfer. The examples chosen here show a distinct word-for-word translation: thus for instance in Hebre w the word for 'all' also means 'every', and 'another time' is the only way to express the meaning of 'again'. It seems that only by careful comparison between the English form and the exact equivalent in Hebrew can we evaluate what we call in this paper 'true L1 transfer'. Thus in the case of 'where to put it?' I think that developmentally it would be more plausible to have 'where I put it?' than the form given here which is an exact equivalent to the Hebrew form.

6. Considering myself a rather 'good language learner', I can report that I find myself still constantly picking up chunks in the new L2, mostly idiomatic expressions and the like, and trying to incorporate them in my more expressive use of L2. Every person probably does that to some extent even in his/her own language, I am pointing out however a conscious effort on the part of the learner.

7. Self-correction can be carried out by giving the subject a transcription of an earlier session in which there are errors that at the point of correction the learner has obviously overcome. We tap therefore the learner's abiliy to correct faulty forms whichs/he is no longer producing.

8. The index for evaluating learning strategies in the present study was only arrived at after the data had been collected and analyzed. Ideally this idex should be worked on during the actual collection of data - which would make it much more reliable.

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